

# OBLIQ SOUND™

## GILFEMA

### = Biography =

Although their geographical roots are spread out on the map, one listen to **Gilfema** leaves the distinct impression that guitarist/vocalist **Lionel Loueke** (from Benin, West Africa), bassist **Massimo Biolcati** (from a Swedish and Italian lineage) and Hungarian drummer **Ferenc Nemeth** were destined to find one another. Gilfema has released just two albums — the group's self-titled 2005 debut and now their new 2008 release ***Gilfema + 2***, featuring the trio plus guest clarinetists **Anat Cohen** and **John Ellis** — yet their recordings project a sense of intuitiveness in their interactions that more commonly result from decades of playing together.

The collective history of Gilfema begins in 1999, when Loueke, Biolcati and Nemeth met at the Berklee College of Music in Boston and jammed together for the first time. Although all in Gilfema are equal creative partners, each member contributing material to the group's repertoire, for the full story it's necessary to backtrack, to Benin's largest city, Cotonou, where the young Lionel (pronounced lee-oh-nell) Loueke first touched a guitar as a teen.

Exposed to a variety of music while growing up, Loueke's interest in the guitar was sparked by watching an older brother play the instrument in a popular local Afro-pop band. Lionel discovered that he too had a knack for the guitar. He immersed himself in various African styles but it wasn't until he heard a recording by the American jazz guitarist George Benson that Loueke knew where he was headed. "I wondered how it was possible to play a guitar like that," Loueke told *JazzTimes* magazine. "The notes he was playing had nothing to do with what I was used to, and the technique was so strange and so fast. I didn't know he was improvising; I thought all the notes were part of the composition."

Loueke began studying other jazz guitarists, and he was soon proficient enough to gain admission to a music college in Côte d'Ivoire—Lionel was such a quick study that some of his teachers asked *him* for lessons! Loueke soon toured the United States with a small group, and in 1994 he relocated to Paris to further his studies at a music school. He spent five years there, then, at age 26, decided it was time to head to the birthplace of jazz, the United States.

Loueke enrolled at Berklee, and during an evening jam he found himself locked into scintillating grooves with two European students, Massimo Biolcati and Ferenc Nemeth. Biolcati was from Stockholm, where, at age 16, he had learned guitar before switching to bass—at first a fretless electric variety, then the upright bass with which he's since become associated. Biolcati played at first around Torino, Italy, but at 21, he returned to Sweden to study at the Royal Music Academy of Stockholm. He took jobs playing Scandinavian folk music but his heart was in jazz. "In jazz and improvised music," he says, "I have found the perfect medium to pour all the things I assimilate in my ongoing journey of discovery." Biolcati was still in his early twenties when he received a scholarship to study at Berklee, where he first came across both Loueke and Nemeth.

Nemeth had come to Boston via Hungary, where he was born in the city of Keszthely. Watching his drummer father in action, Ferenc, even at age 3, displayed a sense of rhythm that his dad knew was worth nurturing in the child. As he grew, Nemeth studied music, taking piano lessons and working in both classical and Top 40 formats with local groups. He studied classical percussion at the Richter János Conservatory in Győr, graduated to the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest, which had a jazz department, and at 22 enrolled in Berklee, where he studied with top jazz drum teacher Gary Chaffee. Nemeth started work on his Master's degree at the New England Conservatory of Music and finished his studies at USC in Los Angeles.

It was in L.A. in 2001 that Loueke, Massimo and Nemeth once again found their paths crossing. The three Berklee grads were all auditioning for, and were accepted to, the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, where students have the golden opportunity to study and work with some of the masters of the field. By the end of Loueke's audition, Herbie Hancock, Terence Blanchard and Wayne Shorter were all maneuvering to see which one would get the opportunity to use the talented young African with the hollow-body guitar in his band. "Lionel is an amazing guitarist. He's like a musical painter and full of surprises!" Hancock has said.

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Loueke ended up working initially with Blanchard while attending the Institute, appearing on the trumpeter's *Bounce* and *Flow* albums. Biolcati, meanwhile, worked during his time at the Institute with Hancock, Shorter and other jazz titans such as Dave Holland, Wayne Shorter, Kenny Barron, John Scofield and Christian McBride, and has since performed with Lizz Wright, Ravi Coltrane, Paquito D'Rivera and many others. Nemeth also began his professional career while at the Institute, appearing on recordings by Blanchard and Dave Grusin, Dave Samuels, John Abercrombie and others. Since then his resumé has included work with Hancock, Shorter, McBride, John Patitucci, David Benoit, Steve Turre, Kenny Wheeler and others.

It was in 2005 that Hancock invited Loueke to join his band, and the guitarist has remained a core member since, appearing on the legendary keyboardist's recent Grammy-winning album, *River: The Joni Letters*, and touring with Hancock behind the album as well. But 2005 also marked the birth of Gilfema. The trio's self-titled ObliqSound debut earned rave reviews, with *Downbeat* writing that the album "skillfully combines West African sensibilities with serious jazz chops," All Music Guide raving, "The sounds are soaring, beautifully conceived, and concisely executed," and veteran jazz critic Stanley Crouch opining, "This is music that can be appreciated for both its obvious skill and its power to entertain."

All three members of Gilfema have kept extremely busy since that debut three years ago. Loueke has released three well-received solo albums, *In a Trance* (Space Time); *Virgin Forest*, his debut ObliqSound solo album which won a 2008 Independent Music Award for best song, World Traditional, and was a finalist for best album, World Fusion; and his major label debut this year on Blue Note, called *Karibu*. His musicians of choice on all of his solo projects have been primarily Biolcati and Nemeth—in order to keep a separate identity from Gilfema, they go under the name the Lionel Loueke Trio whenever they record or perform Loueke's solo music, rather than compositions penned by and conceived for Gilfema.

Both Biolcati and Nemeth have worked on numerous projects outside of the Gilfema/Lionel Loueke Trio format as well. Nemeth has recorded with fellow ObliqSound artists Tama Waipara, Grand Pianoramax, and Renovation Unlimited, as well as many others. He also released his own album, *Night Songs*, last year, and was a finalist for a 2008 Independent Music Award for Best Jazz Album. The album featured Nemeth in sextet with an all-star team of Mark Turner and Chris Cheek on saxophones, Loueke on guitar, Aaron Parks on piano and John Patitucci on bass. 2007 also found Nemeth collaborating with saxophonist Javier Vercher on an album called *Wheel of Time*, with Loueke guesting on guitar and Chip Taylor (writer of the rock classic "Wild Thing") providing spoken word.

This year also saw the release of Biolcati's solo debut, *Persona*, on ObliqSound. The recording features Loueke (guitar), Pete Rende (piano and accordion), Jeff Ballard (drums) and special guests Lizz Wright and Gretchen Parlato on vocals. Reviewing the album, All About Jazz noted its "cutting edge, fusionesque syncopations and happy beats, unabashed improv, and pensive balladeering," and All Music Guide has called "one of the more intriguing and diverse modern jazz issues of 2008."

Each member of Gilfema has maintained a busy schedule, but clearly they see the release of *Gilfema + 2*, the sophomore album under that shared moniker, recorded with clarinetists John Ellis and Anat Cohen, as something of a watershed event. "For me," said Biolcati, "it was one of the most amazing recording experiences because of the ease of the flowing of the ideas. It was so smooth."

Adds Nemeth, "I think we've grown as a group since the first Gilfema album, and we've done a lot of developing. This album represents how we got from one place to another."

Loueke offers a final word: "We never hold back and *Gilfema + 2* is proof."